

JACQUELYN MALONE
Playbill for the Gray One

1. How My Father Spends His Time

The playbill reads, "How Can What Is Be Without What Was." The Gray One—a puppet with a thoughtless head—tries to act his part, crying though he can't remember why. Fumbling in the medicine chest, gaping at the script, he stalks the stage on paddled strings, bobbing alike before the mailman, the sobbing child, a blank wall. He stops to pat a cushion, ceaselessly groping for his mind, but it has joined a troop of traveling jugglers and left him timeless. The supporting cast ad-libs and whispers cues as the Gray One whacks his useless head, aware he's not aware.

2. Bottom Stands Center Stage

The crowd has gone, and the Gray One hangs on his appointed peg, between the star-eyed ballerina and the crafty fox. In the workshop silence, only the moon moves, slipping a slice of silver across the puppet's wooden head, stirring a dream of the role abandoned long ago. In the forest, leaves and hillocks of light even-coat the darkness where creatures blip and scurry under half-doused spots. Close by, mischief is afoot, and the Gray One, exposed to what he can't take in, stands center stage, his nose, a muzzle, his voice, a bray, as howls of laughter surround him.

3. The Youngest Grandchild's Play

Little Red Riding Hood had a grandpa
who was a hunter and knew which animals
to kill—until the forest paths grew tangled
and unsure, and he forgot the simplest things.
When it came to him that red meant danger,
he watched the child with wolfish eyes,
and because he'd gone mute, Red Riding Hood
was afraid. But the Gray One will show
the child many unyielding twists: He lets
the creature in without heed to Grandma's
screams. He knows the axe as friend,
and when the mopping up begins, he cradles it
and croons—blood runs down his wooden
cheek, and Red Riding Hood's eyes grow huge.

4. Lear and the Stage Manager's Play

It's the Gray One's scene, and the stage
is rigged, but he isn't set for what
will come. Behind each flat lies the void
of what's forgotten, and snow removes all
trace of yesterday's paths. One hundred billion
flakes, and the heath is white. One hundred
billion neurons, and his brain is barren—beard
and mind tangled, all sense of north or past
gone. And yet he plunges on, lost in the mocking
wind, lost in a flickering fury at the night
and with himself. Like the snow-slapped
footlamps, his anger sputters as, visage naked
and ablaze, he bellows, "I will do such things . . ."
to the malevolent force behind the shifting skies.

5. Rewinding Plato

Put the Gray One in a cave and let him tell us
what is real. When he enters its damp mouth,
he leaves behind the light—his notions of health,
justice, love. Chain him to his chair and lock
his head. Let him chase the shadows down
the paths in the muddled ways the brain takes,
where echoes scramble voices from the past—
sounds that fade in fits and starts. In the cave's pool
the chamber erodes from within as water eats away
the stone, the void growing larger day by day.
Let him watch the eyeless fish pursue
sightless crickets. Then let him tell us,
of all he's known—of taste, smell, caress,
idea—what he expects to last the last.

6. "Who Goes There?"

To play the dead is not a role he dreamed of,
but the Gray One intrepidly takes the part.
Dark and cold, the scene unfolds
in Denmark, the planet in the grip
of ghostly lights—green, red—above
the snow-white fields. Wind on the ramparts
strikes his chain-mail shirt until it melts
into his bones, and he can't remember why he's here
nor why revenge will be the rut his mind will take
when it cannot bear the treachery of fate.
Boldly he shows himself—who fears to die
who is already dead? A voice demands,
"Halt? Who goes there?" Startled, he cannot
stammer king or player. Ghost or fool.

7. Resolving Roles on New Year's Eve

Because every puppet must be used, he has a walk-on role—
as Father Time—though when his mind was clear,
the Gray One aced it as the clown. In the span at which
a puppet's years play out, he's due a few. And he, alas,
will get them. In the wings, disembodied hands
move in the shadows as curtains rise. The Gray One
steps forth into the spotlight—a pan-eyed owl
on a winter branch. Around the stage, masked
revelers mill—a shrill breed with horns and whistles
as the ceremonial end begins. The silly crowd
apes him as the Gray One makes his addled way
across the boards. In the winged darkness
the impresario takes notes. Since time favors
oblivion, he plots to reassign the parts.

8. How the Gray One Leaves the Stage

In the spotlight, the Gray One sees a shadow
that flits before him on the boards. He stoops
to pick it up. "Oops," he says, and "Oops."
The Fool, his eye cocked, winks aside and chirps,
"Good sir, you need this shepherd's crook," whereat
the Gray One gaffs at the fleeing form. The Fool *thunks*
the puppet's piney head and says, "Termites
in your wood, good sir?" Laughter flares across
the abyss. The Gray One, startled, stares back
to where he came from in the wings
and sees Nothing-Remains-the-Same
and Nothing-Stops, the rude stagehands
who man the set, awaiting the direction
of Nothing to drop the curtain on the stage.